



Homestead Farmers

Suggested Pre-visit Activities

These activities are tied into the Missouri, Illinois, and national standards for Social Studies and Language Arts.



Lesson Overview

Students will work together to create a timeline to illustrate the evolution of grain harvesting technology used by farmers during the 1800s on the Great Plains.

Objectives

The objective of this activity is to put events into chronological order to illustrate how technology changes over time.

Description

Divide your class into small groups. Copy and cut the cards on page titled "TIMELINE." Give each group a set of the cards. Working together, have them decide the correct sequence of the cards. On a large sheet of paper, copy the timeline found on the following page. Using the "Numbered-Heads Approach," have each group share their sequence with the class by placing their cards on the timeline.

Historical Background

Farming on the Great Plains has always been a struggle. The Great Plains is an arid, treeless plain that stretches from the one-hundredth meridian to the Rocky Mountains. With searing heat in the summer and bitter cold in winter, it is a land of extremes. For pioneer farmers to succeed and prosper, they had to adapt to drought, blizzard, tornadoes, hail, grasshopper hordes and other harsh, unpredictable conditions.

Despite these conditions, American Indian people cultivated crops, such as corn, squash, sunflowers and beans, on the Great Plains for generations. American Indians, such as the Mandan and Hidatsa, formed a unique culture based on farming the fertile river bottoms and hunting the animals of the grasslands. In this culture the women cultivated corn, beans, and squash, using hoes made from a bison shoulder blade, while the men hunted for deer, bison, elk, and other game animals. To accommodate their twofold lifestyle of farming and hunting, they lived along the river banks in permanent earth lodge villages and used bison hide tents for hunting trips.

Between the 1840s and 1860s, American farmers bypassed the Great Plains in covered wagons as they headed for fertile land in Oregon and California. Early explorers described the area as unsuitable for farming and the Great Plains became known as the “Great American Desert.” It was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that settlers looked to the Great Plains as possible farmland. To encourage settlement of the area, the United States government passed the Homestead Act in 1862. This act provided 160 acres of free land to any head of household. The promise of free land drew diverse people to the Great Plains, including African Americans and newly-arrived European immigrants.

The new farmers of the Great Plains adapted to its conditions in a very different way than American Indian people. The new farmers became known as “sodbusters,” because they used steel plows to cut the thick, matted sod to create their fields on the prairie uplands. They learned to plant crops resistant to drought, like wheat, and also grew potatoes, corn, and rye. They lived in homes made of sod bricks. These “soddies” were well insulated but prone to being dry and dusty or wet and damp. Besides a soddie, a typical homestead also had a barn, windmill, and well. The Sodbusters found a land which, with enough rain and hard work, produced bountiful crops. The “Great American Desert” had become “America’s Breadbasket.”

Learning the story of the Great Plains farmers is to discover a story of heroes. It is not a story of individual legends, but one of ordinary people surviving often severe conditions because of adaptability, self-reliance, and perseverance. The story of the Great Plains farmers is not one simply of the past, but of the present. It reminds us how dependent we all are on farmers to help feed our families, our community, and our growing world.

Vocabulary

adapt - to change oneself to fit new conditions.

acre - a measure of land equal to 43,560 square feet.

bottomlands - low land that has a river flowing through it.

bushel - a measure of volume for grain, fruit, vegetables; it equals 4 pecks or 22 quarts.

culture - a combination of ideas, beliefs, art, music, and traditions of a group of people in a certain time.

environment - all the conditions that surround a person, animal or plant and affect growth, actions, character, etc.

Great Plains - the level stretch of land located between the Rocky Mountains and the Mississippi River.

harvest - the act of gathering a crop of grain, fruit, etc. when it becomes ripe.

immigrant - a person who comes into a foreign country to make a new home.

pioneer - a person who goes before, opening up the way for others to follow.

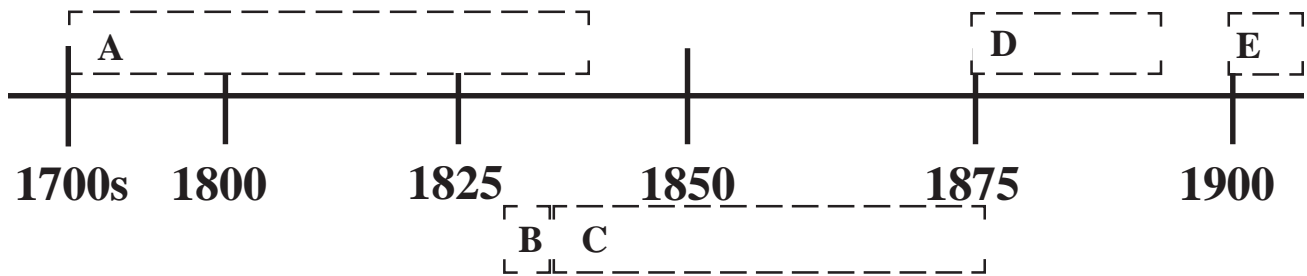
plow - a tool used in farming to cut into the soil and turn it up; it is usually pulled by a tractor or in earlier times, an animal or person.

prairie - a large area of level or rolling grassland without many trees.

sod - the top layer of earth containing grass with its roots; turf.

threshing machine - a machine for separating grain crops from straw.

TIMELINE



D	E
McCormick Harvester and Binder allowed one-man to cut and bind grain. Up to twenty-five acres a day.	Tractor-drawn thresher cuts, cleans and delivers grain to wagon to be hauled away by truck. Up to 50 acres a day.

A
Hand-held sickle and scythe used to cut grain. Grain bundled by hand. One-half to two acres in a day.

C	B
McCormick "Old Reliable" riding harvesting machine. Cut grain bundled by hand. Up to twelve acres a day.	Horse-drawn reaping machine. Operator walked alongside machine. Up to ten acres a day.

(copy/cut)

For more information about the evolution of grain harvesting equipment, visit the Shennandoah Valley Agricultural Research & Extension Center at < <http://www.vaes.vt.edu/steles/mccormick/mccormick.html>>.

Book List

Cobblestone Magazine. "Willa Cather." Peterborough, New Hampshire: Cobblestone Publishing, December 1980.

Conrad, Pam. Prairie Song. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1985.

Harvey, Brett. My Prairie Year. New York: Holiday House, 1986.

Mac Lachlan, Patricia. Sarah, Plain and Tall. New York: Harper Collins Publishing, 1985.

Rounds, Glen. The Treeless Plain. New York: Holiday House, 1967.

Sanford, Mollie Dorsey. Mollie: The Journal of Mollie Dorsey Sanford in Nebraska and Colorado Territories 1857-1866. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1976.

Scott, Lynn H. The Covered Wagon and Other Adventures. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987.

Van Leeuwen, Jean. Going West. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers, 1992.

Wilder, Laura Ingalls. Little House on the Prairie. New York: Harper and Row, 1971.

Wilson, Gilbert L. Wahenee. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981.

Related National Park Service Sites

George Washington Birthplace National Monument
R.R. 1, Box 717
Washington's Birthplace, VA 22443
(804) 224-1732

Booker T. Washington National Monument
12130 B.T. Washington Hwy.
Hardy, VA 24101
(540) 721-2094

Lincoln Boyhood National Monument
P.O. Box 1816
Lincoln City, IN 47552
(812) 937-4541

George Washington Carver National Monument
5646 Carver Road
Diamond, MO 64840
(417) 325-4151

Knife River Indian Village National Historic Site
P.O. Box 9
Stanton, ND 58571
(701) 745-3300

Homestead National Monument of America
Route 3, Box 47
Beatrice, NE 68310
(402) 223-3514